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The Church in the Thought of Charles Taze Russell

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in

Religious Studies

by

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July 1990

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ABSTRACT

The Church in the Thought of Charles Taze Russell

by

Gene Edson Ahlstrom

Charles Taze Russell's views of the church fit into the theme of chronological primitivism, that of restoring the biblical church, prevalent among other nineteenth-century religious leaders. His view of the church moves in two directions. While emphasizing antisectarianism, ahistoricism, and the importance of freedom in declaring that the church is not yet completed, he nevertheless does develop a church structure which increasingly restricts freedom and eventually contributes to sectarianism. What were his views and where did they come from? While in some ways his views are very clear regarding the church, on the other hand there is confusion.

After sketching Russell's life, *this thesis* ~~I will~~ considers his views on sectarianism and on church history. *The author* ~~will~~ explore his views on the church and what they include by comparing the 1891-1896 period with that *— 1891*

which came after 1900. Russell's views on the New Covenant (in contrast to that which is in the Old Testament), about whether the New Covenant is sealed and in force or not, will be considered because not only does the resulting controversy suggest confusion, but it is directly related to the role of the church.

I will give strong emphasis to primary source materials and comment upon secondary sources when necessary. It is not my intent to repeat what others have already said. I do desire to place Russell in his proper context in relation to current historical studies, raise some issues of interpretation, and provide something of value that can contribute to future discussions.

Focusing on the church is relevant and not too broad a subject, but other aspects of the Russell's thought will not be directly considered. Finally, I will conclude by showing how Russell's explanation of the change in his views of what he called the "New Covenant" is inadequate and point out the results of the change.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent studies in the history of religion in America since colonial days have focused on the theme of primitivism. These studies have not included Charles T. Russell's views. In the near future, I expect that there will be renewed interest in this popular figure from the turn of the last century in American religious culture. The Churches of Christ were not alone in their seeking "to transmute the bondage of sectarianism into the freedom of Christian union by planting one foot squarely in the primitive church and striding boldly with the other into the millennial dawn."¹ As we shall see, Russell fits well into this nineteenth-century theme of restoring the biblical church and moving into the millennium.

¹ Richard T. Hughes and C. Allen Leonard, Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 112. Other recent studies on primitivism include Richard T. Hughes, ed., The American Quest for the Primitive Church (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) and Theodore D. Bozeman, To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

Most of what has been written concerning Russell and his teachings can be classified into three areas. First, there were the doctrinal responses to Russell which began in his own time and have continued through this century to provide an apologetic Christian response to Watch Tower teachings. Pastors like John J. Ross and Isaac Haldeman wrote booklets; E. L. Eaton, James Forrest, and W. C. Stevens wrote books (most published after 1910). The late Walter Martin is a more contemporary author along this line, as is Edmond Gruss, who was from a Jehovah's Witness background. A second strain of literature has come from those who grew up in Bible-student or Jehovah's-Witness circles. This material represents those dealing with their own history, of which Russell was a part. A. H. Macmillan, who joined the movement under Russell, was one of the first writers. More recent authors, to include Timothy White, Alan Rogerson, and M. James Penton, have written fairly unbiased historical works. Thirdly, there is the perspective of a few who have never been associated with Jehovah's Witnesses nor been Christian apologists.

James Beckford's sociological study in Britain is a prime example. It is from this third perspective that I will consider the topic of the church in this study.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Charles T. Russell was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, on February 16, 1852 and grew up in a devout Presbyterian home. His mother died when he was nine years old. Russell's relationship to his mother and her death probably played a significant role in his life, but about it one can only speculate. James Beckford is correct in observing that reliable information on his background is surprisingly sparse.²

Joseph Russell involved his son at a young age in his clothing store business, which was quite successful. This ended the young Russell's formal schooling. He expressed more interest in religion than his father by joining a Congregational church.

² James A. Beckford, The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses (New York: Halstead Press, 1975), p. 1.

As a teenager, Russell was obsessed with the doctrine of eternal punishment.³ However, in not being able to square his idea of the love of God with this doctrine, he ended his involvement with the church and passed through a period of religious skepticism.⁴ By 1870, Russell had encountered the Advent Christian preacher Jonas Wendell. Thus Russell came to believe that the Bible could be correct, and the real problem might be the creeds of the established churches. The 1870s was a time of Bible study, reading Second Adventist literature, and developing friendships that contributed to Russell's solidifying his Bible interpretations.

The most significant personal contact was with Nelson Barbour, the editor of the Herald of the Morning. Russell began reading his magazine in January 1876 and was influenced to conclude that time prophecies, which he disliked because of what

³ Charles T. Russell, Pastor Russell's Sermons (New York: International Bible Student's Association, c. 1917), p. 517.

⁴ For Russell's own account of this period, see Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence Reprints (Pittsburgh: Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society, 1919) 5 (July 15, 1906): 3821-26.

he saw as their misuse by the Adventists, could be basically correct. He reinterpreted the return of Christ not as bodily but as spiritual, defending Barbour's chronology as correct. Then, in 1877, Russell financed the book Three Worlds written by Barbour. However, within two years they parted company over doctrinal differences.⁵

Soon, in July 1879, Russell began publishing his own magazine Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence, the same year that he married Maria Ackley.⁶ In 1884, Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society was incorporated.

Over the next four decades, massive amounts of literature would be produced, and Russell would eventually become a well-known though controversial religious figure. Between 1886 and 1904, he published six volumes of a work he called Millennial

⁵ For an account of the early schisms following the publishing of Three Worlds see M. James Penton, Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), pp. 22-24.

⁶ There were no children from the marriage. For an account of the later marital troubles, see Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, pp. 35ff.

Dawn. (After 1904, the series was retitled Studies in the Scriptures.) He continued to publish his magazine and various other materials.

The amount of literature produced was astounding. By 1916, the number of copies of books and magazines sold was 19,964,000. This did not include the small pieces of free literature which in 1912 alone came to 35,520,475 items.⁷

There were other activities, programs, and changes. Russell debated Methodist E. L. Eaton in 1903 and Disciples of Christ elder L. S. White in 1908. In 1909, he moved his headquarters to Brooklyn and incorporated the People's Pulpit Association. Sermons were published in newspapers across America; a series of articles was written for the Overland Monthly. Russell made a missionary journey in 1911 and formed the International Bible Student's Association in London in 1912. The Photo Drama of Creation, released in 1914, was his last major project. This motion picture on the earth's

⁷ The Laodicean Messenger (Chicago: The Bible Student's Bookstore, 1923), p. 106.

history, which included science and philosophy, was in four parts of two hours each.

Russell was active in his work until his death in 1916. He was buried in Rosemont United Cemetery in his hometown where his gravestone is marked, "The Laodicean Messenger," a reference to his being held as the spokesman to the seventh epoch of the church described in Revelation 3:14-19.

SECTARIANISM AND CHURCH HISTORY

Before considering Russell's view of sectarianism and church history, it is important to recognize how he approached the Bible. First, parallelism and the search for types and antitypes played a major role. For Russell, 1813 B.C. to A.D. 70 was parallel to A.D. 33 to A.D. 1915.⁸ Secondly, the role of reason was primary. Russell developed his view of God according to what he considered reasonable. Phrases like, "having reached this reasonable conclusion" or "what could be more reasonable" are commonly found throughout his

⁸ Alan Rogerson, Millions Now Living Will Never Die (London: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1969), appendix B.

writings.⁹ Acceptance or rejection of doctrines from the Bible or otherwise is dependent upon the criterion of reasonableness. Russell's views fit into popular Baconianism which provided security and allowed him to believe that his "theological picture included a complete and perfect scientific world-view."¹⁰

Russell had much to say about the current situation in Christianity. Sectarianism born from the nominal church was producing infidels.¹¹ He was concerned about the number of Christian sects competing as representing the church.

The various creeds continually conflict and clash; and as each claims a Bible basis, the confusion of thought, and evident discord, are charged to God's Word.¹²

⁹ Charles T. Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, Vol. 1, Divine Plan of the Ages (Allegheny: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1907), pp. 33-34.

¹⁰ Herbert Hovenkamp, Science and Religion in America 1800-1860 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), p. 27.

¹¹ Watch Tower Reprints 2 (March 1, 1892): 1375.

¹² Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, 1:24.

Nineteenth-century America was an age of intense sectarian strife and widespread anxiety over religious pluralism. Once Russell became convinced that the Bible could be correct and that Christendom had misrepresented its truth, he began to conclude that there was not any religious organization that represented the true church. In fact, the true church had apostatized early in Christian history. Russell expressed this when he declared that

In showing faith in this divine arrangement, we must confine ourselves wholly to the divine records and must entirely ignore ecclesiastical history--remembering that the predicted "falling away" had begun to work even in the Apostolic times.¹³

This antihistoricism was prevalent among earlier religious figures in American history who had the goal of restoring the primitive church. For example, Roger Williams came to believe that the authentic church had not existed for over a thousand years and that the New Testament alone served as the

¹³ Charles T. Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, Vol. 6, The New Creation (Brooklyn: International Bible Student's Association, 1911), p. 234.

archetype for the form and function of the church.¹⁴ Thomas Campbell's two common themes were the unity of all Christians and the restoration of the primitive church.¹⁵ Sidestepping history such as this comes close to Russell's views.

Russell taught that it was neglect of the Bible that brought on the Dark Ages and the sectarianism that came out of these Dark Ages.¹⁶ Later, when visiting the Far East, he apologized for all Christendom's having neglected the Bible.¹⁷

Russell's call was one for freedom. Christians were to make a clear break with sectarianism and its bondage. On the other hand, he was not attempting to organize or reestablish the true church in an earthly organizational sense. His purpose was to

¹⁴Hughes and Allen, Illusions of Innocence, pp. 58-59.

¹⁵Bill J. Humble, "The Restorationist Ideal in the Churches of Christ," in Richard T. Hughes, ed., The American Quest for the Primitive Church, p. 221.

¹⁶Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, 6:207-8.

¹⁷Russell, Sermons, p. 445.

gather the saints.¹⁸ The call was for the church to separate itself from nominal Christendom.

We admonish the New Creation to have nothing whatever to do with any of these semi-religious societies, clubs, orders, churches; but to "come out from amongst them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing." (2 Cor. 6:17). . . . Our choice and our advice to others so far as it will practically apply to their cases, would be to stand free from all human organizations, united only to the Lord and to those who have his Spirit.¹⁹

To what are they to come? As of 1893, we read:

The true view, as we conceive it, is as follows: God's church is not yet completed and hence not yet organized. . . . These unorganized but merely called out ones. . .²⁰ are a "voluntary association of believers."

Russell was quick to deny that he was forming anything more than a temporary fellowship. Toward the end of his life, he recalled a conversation with a minister of the Reformed Church; Russell reiterated that he had no church.²¹

¹⁸ Charles T. Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, Vol. 3, Thy Kingdom Come (Allegheny: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1907), p. 139.

¹⁹ Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, 6:581.

²⁰ Watch Tower Reprints 2 (September 1 & 15, 1893): 1573-74.

²¹ Watch Tower Reprints 6 (July 15, 1915): 5730.

It is important to understand the source of Russell's disdain for sectarianism and of his elimination of the value of church history. To begin with, there was his own experience struggling with what he came to conclude to be unreasonable doctrines (eternal punishment, the Trinity, immortality of the soul to name the most prominent). Once he rejected much of traditional Christian theology, the die was cast so that he would not accept the Bible in any traditional terms. This is particularly significant since it was his nonacceptance of traditional Bible doctrines that was a major driving force behind Russell's primitivism, linking the fall of the church to the adoption of false or erroneous doctrine.²²

Directly related to this struggle was Russell's relationship with clergy at a young age. When he began to "think for himself" as a teenager and sought answers, not only were the clergy not helpful, they discouraged him. Russell's sister

²² The "Christians" earlier in the century rarely viewed their primitivism this way. See Hughes and Allen, Illusions of Innocence, p. 105.

Margaret Land spoke in 1908 of how a minister had told her brother, "I would advise you to stop investigating these things for they were never intended to be understood."²³ According to her, this was an important factor in his leaving the Congregational church.

Russell was disappointed in preachers since they preached themselves and their denominations.²⁴ Hypocrisy was evident in that

It is safe to say that no ministry of education in any of the so called orthodox sects believes the creed of his own denomination or would think for a moment of defending it in public.²⁵

Throughout Russell's life, on rare occasions, he did have a few positive comments concerning religious leaders. Russell thought that Martin Luther, John Wycliff, John Knox, and others were bold champions for God's Word.²⁶ He called William

²³Laodicean Messenger, p. 181.

²⁴Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, 6:248.

²⁵Russell, Sermons, p. 555.

²⁶Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, 1:23. Notice that Russell does not fully eliminate all of ecclesiastical history. While he implies that there were precursors to his work (who of course had a very different theology than Russell accepted), it

Tyndale a godly man and scholar.²⁷ John and Charles Wesley undoubtedly were consecrated men themselves.²⁸ Dwight L. Moody was seen as very different from most evangelists; he was described in a positive light.²⁹ Despite these positive estimates, Russell's overall view of clergy was negative and increasingly polarized with time, especially in the last fifteen years of his life.

Another possible source of Russell's negative views toward churches and religious organizations was what he read and whom he met. M. James Penton concludes that his views may have come directly from George Storrs and his periodical, the Bible Examiner, although this seems more of a reinforcing factor than actual source.

was only in The Finished Mystery (Studies in the Scriptures, Vol. 7) published after his death that a direct line is sketched from Paul and John through Arius, Waldo, Wycliff, and Luther to Russell.

²⁷Russell, Sermons, p. 552.

²⁸Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, 6:141.

²⁹Leslie W. Jones, What Pastor Russell Said (Chicago: printed privately, 1917), p. 157.

Besides external influences, there is that which is inherent in the process of a biblical primitivism that confronts religious pluralism. The very fact of defining a primordium, whatever that may be, carries with it the idea that opposing views are threats appropriately deserving condemnation.

Regardless of how one accounts for Russell's views, his orientation opposing organization is an important backdrop for understanding his views on what the church should be. As we shall see, Russell had definite concepts about how this voluntary association of believers was to be organized in the millennial-dawn period (the beginning of the thousand years rule of Christ following six thousand years rule of man).

WHAT IS THE CHURCH, HOW IS IT ORGANIZED,

AND WHAT DOES IT PROPERLY INCLUDE?

Russell's most comprehensive writing concerning the church was published in The New Creation in 1904. This was the sixth volume of a series which he called Millennial Dawn. Prior to that, many articles were published in his magazine on the topic. I will begin by considering the emphasis in

what was written between 1891 and 1896, then present his views in The New Creation, and finally compare and contrast the two.

During the early 1890s, as the backdrop for Russell's call to liberty, there was a regular emphasis in the Watch Tower on infidelity in Christendom. The World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, was criticized as exemplifying Christendom's compromise of God's Word.

Russell spoke of the early church as the model for the present. Everybody had a gift to preach, in some way, as God's mouthpiece (Russell's term). Apostolic age believers did not stop to dispute about how they would organize. Being united to Christ, they had the only proper organization. They did not say, "Let us make a creed." If creeds and denominational bias were set aside today, real unity would result, Russell argued. He interpreted simplicity as the key characteristic of the early church.³⁰

³⁰Watch Tower Reprints 2 (July 1, 1892): 1420. See also 1 (April 1882): 344.

Russell saw his mission as restoring this model which was generally lost sight of since the second century. His clearest statement, from an 1893 article, answered a question:

If it is not proper to unite with any of the present nominal churches, would it not be well to form a visible association of our own? Yes, that is what we have--a society modeled after that of the early church. We think we have come back to primitive simplicity.³¹

Russell did not mean that the present church was fully organized. The church was not yet completed and therefore not yet organized.

The church was the little flock of the entirely consecrated who were being called out in the Gospel age. Members of this true church had their names written in heaven. They would, if they did not apostatize, receive the divine nature as joint heirs with Jesus in what Russell called the "New Creation." In a sense, there was a heavenly organization that had continued since apostolic times. This organization accounted for how there could be saints from the beginning of the Gospel age

³¹ Watch Tower Reprints 2 (September 1 & 15, 1893): 1575.

down to its close.³² And this organization exemplified beauty, simplicity, and completeness.

Russell used the term organized in two ways. First, he used it to describe the heavenly organization that began in the first century. This is why the church did not need to organize in the present: it had been organized from the day of Pentecost. Second, Russell used the word organized as a synonym for "completed," a completion that had not yet occurred. In this sense, there was a heavenly organization that was not yet organized.

The ecclesia³³ that formed around Russell's teachings provided fellowship and shared "present truth." But it was not the true church by definition. This visible association ought to resemble the early church, but it was still an

³²Watch Tower Reprints 2 (November 15, 1895): 1895. See also 1 (October 1881): 295.

³³The word "church" comes from the combination of a word meaning "calling or to call" and the preposition "out" in Greek. One might think that the term "called-out ones" would have a specific restorationist meaning because of the separation from a corrupted world. Actually, this was the common word for assembly; it is picked up and utilized with reference to Christian congregations in the New Testament.

earthly organization and could not be properly called God's organization.

The earthly organization, in Russell's thought, was primarily made up of two spiritual classes: (1) The church, which was called the little flock, the Bride of Christ, or the New Creation. (2) The secondary spiritual class of believers who were called the children of Christ or the Great Company (Revelation 7:9) that are not a part of the heavenly church.

This is confusing since salvation for Russell was available to more than just those in the church. This was a departure from traditional Christian theology, in which all those redeemed were members of the church. Timothy White thought that Russell considered both the New Creation and the Great Company as the church.³⁴ While the earthly congregations contain both classes, Russell's writings separate these two groups with only the former being identified as part of the heavenly

³⁴ Timothy White, A People For His Name: A History of Jehovah's Witnesses and an Evaluation (New York: Vantage Press, 1967), p. 97.

organization. Only members of that church could vote, serve as elders, and partake of communion. We will see that greater clarity was given to Russell's ideas regarding these two spiritual classes when The New Creation was published.

Russell's views on some issues vital to the church were drastically changed between the two periods being considered. The role of women in the local congregation was one of these issues. Russell clearly explained his position in the 1890s. Women, as well as men, were anointed to preach. Those women who were gifted to teach should do so.

I Timothy 2:12, Russell explained, did not contradict these views.³⁵ Later this position was reversed, being explained as a return to the New Testament model.

In 1895, this biblical model was discussed by Russell and applied to the ecclesia.³⁶ Despite the belief of living in the last days, it was necessary

³⁵Watch Tower Reprints 2 (July 1893): 1549-50.

³⁶Watch Tower Reprints 2 (November 15, 1895): 1889-96.

to avoid the extreme view of liberty--lack of order --for there was order to biblical simplicity.

Elders, chosen by majority vote of the fully consecrated, would naturally follow the unity of spirit with the congregation. These elders were servants, the number depending on those qualified.

Later, a reader questioned Russell about the laying on of hands, not mentioned in his 1895 article. The response was that while the Apostles conveyed gifts of the spirit this way, these gifts ended with the Apostles. Therefore, laying on of hands was no longer the proper thing for present congregations.³⁷

Russell, nevertheless, had some interest in the gift of healing. A series of articles, written in the Watch Tower in 1896, were probably a response to the popularity of mind cure and Christian Science. Here Russell taught that the gift of healing ceased with the Apostles after accomplishing its object. With the millennial age dawning, healing was included in the general restitution. Because of

³⁷Watch Tower Reprints 3 (April 1, 1896): 1956-57.

this, there might be prayers of healing for those other than the consecrated little flock. But it would not be appropriate for them to pray for themselves because it would nullify their sacrifices.³⁸

Russell's comments on these two issues indicate that there was not an emphasis on the miraculous in the ecclesia in the 1890s. Miracles were not an important feature of the biblical church he wished to restore. Rather, Russell devoted more space and attention to the Lord's Supper and to Baptism during this period.

The Memorial Supper was an annual event that was to be celebrated on the thirteenth day of Nisan in the Jewish calendar, corresponding to Passover. It was a ritual that was referred to every year in the Watch Tower. Russell criticized weekly observance of communion, stating that the "breaking of bread" referred to in scripture was a regular meal and not the Lord's Supper.

³⁸Watch Tower Reprints 3 (July 15, 1896): 2008.

In the early 1890s, most of the emphasis was on a centralized observance. But by 1895, the emphasis had shifted to small groups in one's neighborhood over against a general gathering. Russell felt that the latter disrupted local activities, so in 1894, there were no special invitations to draw visitors to Allegheny. This shift was in essence an attempt to get back to the simplicity and localized observance of the first-century model.³⁹

Only the fully consecrated little flock should partake of communion. However, what was difficult was distinguishing who was or was not included. Russell left this for the individual to decide. Those qualified to partake would have made scriptural affirmations of faith and consecration that should be outwardly observable in Christian character.

The service should be simple, with the elements made up of unleavened bread and raisin juice. While the disciples undoubtedly used light wines, Russell

³⁹ Watch Tower Reprints 2 (March 15, 1895): 1786-87. See also 2 (March 1891): 1289-93 and (March 1, 1894): 1625-26.

discouraged the use of liquor (although he did not rule it out completely). The bread and juice were symbols of Jesus's sacrifice.

Water baptism by immersion was also seen as a symbol but not as a real baptism. The real baptism was an immersion in Christ's death--the entire consecration of one's will. This was essential in being part of the church, whether the water baptism was administered or not. With water baptism, the words said were not significant.

These views on the sacraments and other rituals are important since they demonstrate that, for Russell, these traditional activities did not play a regular role in the life of the congregation. This view contrasts sharply with that of a denomination like the Churches of Christ where water baptism by immersion was essential and communion a weekly activity.

Now that I have summarized Russell's views on the church in the early 1890s, I shift focus to 1904. By that time, many areas relating to the church were more well-defined in Russell's thought. Not only was the role of the primary spiritual

class, the church, identified with the 144,000 mentioned in the book of Revelation,⁴⁰ but greater clarity was given to the Great Company of justified believers. The church was paralleled with the priests, and the Great Company with the Levites. These present "Levites" were failing to make their calling and election sure by not demonstrating their zeal.

Russell probably got the idea of two justified classes from Wesleyan Holiness literature. His familiarity with this literature was evident in that he used the terms "second blessing" and "entire sanctification" and even criticized the views of Holiness people.⁴¹ Thinking along the lines of priest and Levite could have been a working out of the Wesleyan emphasis on justified believers going on to Christian perfection.

There was also, for Russell, movement relating to these classes. Some justified believers became

⁴⁰Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, 6:179-80. This number reflected available positions rather than an election of 144,000 specific individuals.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 157-58.

part of the church, also called the Royal Priesthood. Even though the general call to the Royal Priesthood (the favor of this Gospel age) closed in 1881 because it paralleled the end of Jewish favor in A.D. 36, some had fallen and would be replaced. Most, he argued, fell to the secondary spiritual class, though a few might lose out entirely and be annihilated in what he called the second death (Revelation 20:14-15). A justified believer in the Great Company could also willfully sin and fall into the second death.

In looking at what the local congregation should be, the primordium for Russell was the same.

It is to the New Testament that we must look particularly for our directions respecting the organization and rules of the Church during the days of her humiliation and sacrificing.⁴²

The ecclesia was, for Russell, equivalent to a theological seminary that provided an atmosphere where those who had previously been studying God's Word with creedal spectacles could come to the Bible afresh to hear its message. While Russell always

⁴²Ibid., p. 235.

denied that he had in mind any church in a denominational sense, by 1904 he was using the term church inter- changeably with local congregation.⁴³

There were other changes expressed in The New Creation that demonstrate Russell's formalizing structure along with his increasing authority. The choosing of elders was no longer by majority vote but had to be unanimous by the stretching forth of the hand (following the New Testament pattern). A quarterly term of service for elders was recommended instead of a year. Elders were not a disciplinary council, for such a council would be made up of all New Creatures in the congregation. Russell discussed how to handle accusations against elders and insisted that public rebukes should be rare. It was better to have no elder than an unqualified one. In such cases:

Let the meetings be of an informal kind, with the Bible as the text-book and with Brother Russell representatively present as teacher in Dawns and Towers--your chosen elder, if you prefer.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 321, 326.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 281. Dawns referred to Russell's six volume set of books and Towers to his magazines.

Beyond all of this, Russell rejected some aspects of traditional Protestant churches. Preaching was not a regular occurrence, and Sunday schools were not conducted.⁴⁵

In the area of tithes and offerings, no public collections were to be taken. Russell would later popularize the slogan "Free--No Collection" at his public talks. The tithe (one-tenth) was for the Jews. There was no regulation for the church, but Russell felt that church people should do at least as much as the Jews were required to do. Giving was not therefore discouraged, and contributions could be collected in donation boxes. Russell stated:

Our advice is that the money question be left, so far as possible (and we believe altogether), out of consideration in the general meetings of the Church.⁴⁶

These areas of preaching, Christian education, and supporting the work of the church were different from the average Protestant church of the 1890s. These basic views carried over into the early 1900s.

In summarizing the results of a comparison of

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 554-55.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 347.

Russell's views from these two periods, it is clear that his later views were more comprehensive. Certainly part of the comprehensiveness is a function of explanation in a series of articles in the earlier period and in a large book later. However, I will show that more is involved than that.

In many ways, there were common themes in earlier and later materials. The emphasis on the New Testament model and restoring it was foundational. Criticism of nominal churches and their creeds was continual. The importance of liberty and freedom was repeatedly proclaimed. Views on the Lord's Supper, Baptism, tithing, miracles, and laying on of hands were similar.

But differences were also real. Primitivism was much more defensive by 1904 though not as strong as in the last ten years of Russell's life. Why was it essential to vote by the stretching forth of the hand? It was more than just getting closer to the biblical model. Russell based his argument on the use of the Greek word kiroteneo which he interpreted as "to elect by stretching out the

hand."⁴⁷ Why was he quoting the Greek so much more when he had no reading knowledge of the language? It was because his biblical interpretation was increasingly being challenged⁴⁸ by clergy at the turn of the century. His increased references to falsehood in church history, his more common use of the term "Babylon," and emphasis on Satan's desire to do injury to the church all came out of this.

Moreover, the underlying issue of power was central. There seemed to be some problems with elders in the growing congregations behind some of Russell's arguments. A negative circular attacking Russell as authoritarian was being distributed in 1894.⁴⁹ This circular was only the beginning of both internal and external problems.

The discussion directed toward elders in The New Creation demonstrates that Russell was becoming a domineering religious leader despite his rhetoric of freedom. A lot of what was appearing came out of

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 276.

⁴⁸White, A People for His Name, pp. 59-61.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 53. See also Watch Tower Reprints 2 (June 11, 1894): 1664-65.

the fact that he took a stand similar to the approach exemplified by John Howard in his Bible Advocate earlier in the century. Everyone not in Howard's own Church of Christ had missed the truth in the Bible. There was simply no difference between the Bible and Howard's interpretation of the Bible. Russell spoke along similar lines when he wrote:

Be it known that no other system of theology even claims, or has even attempted, to harmonize every statement of the Bible, yet nothing short of this can we claim for these views.⁵⁰

This attitude was carried through from the first period we summarized when a reader wrote expressing doubt that the world could last much longer. Russell responded:

We see no reason for changing figures--nor could we change them if we would. They are--we believe, God's dates, not ours. But bear in mind, that the end of 1914 is not the date for the beginning but for the end of the time of trouble.⁵¹

Both White and Penton give specific examples of how Russell assumed an increasingly authoritarian

⁵⁰Russell, Studies in the Scriptures, 1:348.

⁵¹Watch Tower Reprints 2 (July 15, 1894): 1677.

stance.⁵² This stance was a natural result of his approach to biblical interpretation, also evidenced in the "Christians" before the Civil War.

This increasingly authoritarian stance was reflected in a formalizing of structure. What was previously called a "visible association," now became known as a church, this despite the disavowal of denominationalism.

Russell's discussion of apostasy among New Creatures and the Great Company (the latter now playing a much more important role) evidenced that such defections were occurring by the turn of the century. A discussion about funeral services and other organizational matters in The New Creation demonstrated that, after close to twenty years of publication of the Watch Tower, there were now a number of structural issues that earlier had been treated as insignificant.

Attitudes toward the role of women in the church represented one of the most extreme shifts in position. Women, thought Russell, should no longer

⁵²See White, A People for His Name, pp. 124-28 and Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, p. 41.

teach in the congregation. It was not simply a matter of getting back to the model of the New Testament. Russell had already thought through the meaning of "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent" (I Timothy 2:12), yet now he totally reversed himself. Probably the most relevant factor was what had happened in his relation to his wife after 1895.⁵³ A fellow worker and partner was now an antagonist.

RUSSELL AND THE NEW COVENANT CONTROVERSY

The most extreme doctrinal shift, gradually occurring over the two periods I have just discussed, had taken place by 1907. This concerned Russell's view of the New Covenant. The idea of the New Covenant was an Old Testament restoration concept (Jeremiah 31:31) that held that, through an agreement between God and his people, they would be free from their sins and receive God's blessing. This idea of the New Covenant was utilized in the New Testament specifically with reference to Jesus and his saving work.

⁵³Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, pp. 35ff.

The doctrine of the New Covenant specifically relates to the role of the church and the issue of sectarianism. In traditional Christian theology, the church is made up of recipients of the unmerited favor of God. The church, while witnessing to this grace, does not add to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus died for the sins of the world and it was his work alone that provided reconciliation between human beings and God. The believer's role was expressed by the words of a popular Christian hymn--"Rock of Ages": "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling."

This New Covenant was seen as based on the death of the sinless Christ (the anointed one) whose blood sealed or made effective the new covenant.⁵⁴ Jesus accomplished the forgiveness for human sin: where the Old Covenant failed because it required total obedience to the law of God, now salvation was redefined as inward change based on receiving forgiveness provided through the blood of Christ. Such forgiveness, according to Hebrews 9:22, was

⁵⁴I suggest a reading of the New Testament book of Hebrews, chapters 9:11-10:23.

impossible without the shedding of blood. Hebrews 10:11-12 further explained that animal sacrifices like bulls and goats could never take away sins. Jesus died once and for all, offered his blood to God the Father, and then sat down at His right hand. This was the meaning of sealing the new covenant by the application of blood.

Russell gradually shifted from this traditional Christian view to one in which the church was seen as a part of the blood sacrifice which provided the basis for the New Covenant, thus sealing it. In order to understand Russell's views and the changes he made concerning the doctrine of the New Covenant, three questions need to be explored: (1) how, for Russell, was the term the Christ properly used? (2) when, in Russell's view, was the New Covenant sealed? (3) when, in Russell's view, did/does it come into force?

The first question regards Russell's idea of the mystery of the relationship between Christ and the church. For him, the messiah was not Jesus alone but included the church as well. This two-faceted concept was based on Russell's reading of

the two-part sacrifice in the Old Testament (Leviticus 16:14-15) regarding the bull and the goat.⁵⁵ Jesus would be the part represented by the bull, and the church would be the part represented by the goat.

Russell used the term the Christ in two ways. First, it was an equivalent term for Jesus. For example, he used the term to refer to Christ and his brethren as the church in 1881.⁵⁶ Secondly, Russell used the term the Christ to refer to Jesus and the church. He spoke of the church's oneness with Jesus as members of the Christ.⁵⁷ Russell kept this perspective throughout his ministry.

When, for Russell, was the New Covenant, which required the application of blood at a specific time, sealed? White correctly points out that there was a major change of position here. An article printed in March 1880 (content repeated in 1881),

⁵⁵White, A People for His Name, pp. 104-108.

⁵⁶Watch Tower Reprints 1 (September 1881): 289.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 270.

was reprinted in April 1909.⁵⁸ The view presented here was that the sealing would not take place until the last member of the church was glorified. As early as 1885, Russell expressed a more traditional Christian perspective in which the mediator of the New Covenant was the man Christ Jesus. Russell, at that time, held that the sealing and putting into force of the New Covenant was completed by the fiftieth day following the crucifixion of Jesus.

Thus, the death of Christ, by meeting our penalty, mediating for us or making "reconciliation for iniquity" RATIFIED or established the New Covenant, putting it into force, and so, immediately after Jesus' sacrifice was complete and had been formally presented to God on our behalf, came the Pentecostal blessing, marking the beginning of the New Covenant.

This comes from the very same article in which Russell also says with reference to salvation in the millennium:

It will have all the blessings and promises contained in the New Covenant, but not the added blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant

⁵⁸ Watch Tower Reprints did not print the 1880 article. The first part of the 1909 article was obviously not original since Russell defended himself by arguing that his views had not changed.

none will then be called to be the "seed"--
the Christ which shall bless the world.⁵⁹

These two quotations showing Russell's 1885 view of the New Covenant, now placed in the past, contrasted with the earlier view of 1880-81, where the New Covenant was placed in the future. The use of the term the Christ remains unchanged. Notice that the New Covenant is distinct from the Abrahamic Covenant, with the latter relating to the church. Later, in 1907, Russell stated that he used the expression New Covenant as a name for the Abrahamic covenant. This cannot be the case in relation to the second quotation.

Finally, when, in Russell's view, did or does the New Covenant go into force? In relation to the change between 1881 and 1885, both the sealing and the going into force were interchangeable and had shifted from the future to the past. I will show that these two issues later divide in Russell's thought, ceasing to be interchangeable. The change to the 1880-81 position in 1907 was not as abrupt as

⁵⁹ Watch Tower Reprints 1 (October 1885): 788, 791.

White leads us to believe. By 1900, Russell tells the reader:

Let us remember altho the church is justified by the blood of Christ, which seals the New Covenant, nevertheless, the New Covenant itself is not considered as having gone into effect during this Gospel age.⁶⁰

Two years later we read,

It was "the blood of the New Covenant" that sealed, made binding, made effective, God's New Covenant. The New Covenant is given to Israel and the world only indirectly: the Father's dealings are not with Israel nor with the world under this New Covenant but with the mediator of the New Covenant--the Christ. During this Gospel age, he is accepting the church as the members of the body of this great mediator, through the merit of the head. When the entire mediator shall be complete, the covenant will come into force, become effective to all the families of the earth--thus constituting the blessing mentioned in the covenant made with Abraham.⁶¹

The New Covenant was sealed yet not in force according to these accounts.⁶² This is important

⁶⁰ Watch Tower Reprints 3 (October 1, 1900): 2709.

⁶¹ Watch Tower Reprints 4 (November 15, 1902): 3109.

⁶² While Russell took a middle position between premillennial and postmillennial views--see Watch Tower Reprints 1 (April 1883): 470--he is not consciously paralleling such a split with regard to this issue.

because it shows Russell's gradual return to the 1880-81 position long before Paul S. L. Johnson supposedly brought the matter to Russell's attention in 1905.⁶³ The next logical step from the New Covenant not being in force is that it has not yet been sealed, the step clearly taken by 1907.

Russell did make comments regarding the change. In responses from a meeting in St. Louis on August 11, 1907, he was recorded saying:

I used the New Covenant as a name for the Abrahamic Covenant because my mind was not clear that the Abrahamic Covenant was the Old Covenant, made long ago before the Jewish Covenant.

If you look back, you will find you have done a great many silly things and that is one of the silly things I did. Because I have got my "thinker" to work, and see that what I thought was the New Covenant is not the new one somebody takes me to task.⁶⁴

Later in the Watch Tower, we read:

What then is the change? Merely we now see

⁶³White, A People for His Name, p. 110. Notice that we are not given any source relating to Johnson's role. Penton later references White on this point even though it is undocumented.

⁶⁴Leslie W. Jones, What Pastor Russell Taught on the Covenants, Mediator, Ransom, Sin Offering, and the Atonement (Chicago: printed privately, 1919), pp. 346-47.

that we have for years been using wrong terms for right thoughts. For instance, we have spoken of Jesus being the church's Mediator, when we should have said that he is the church's redeemer and advocate and the world's Mediator because the latter is the Scriptural presentation. We have spoken of ourselves as being blessed by the terms of the New Covenant where as clearer light upon the subject shows us that it is Israel and the world to get God's blessing thus and that the church gets her blessing under the most favorable portions of the original Abrahamic Covenant.

Russell firmed up these changes and made reference to Jesus's blood which included the church as joint-sacrificers. The sacrifice of Christ, head and body, had progressed for over eighteen hundred years. Only when the sacrifice of the Christ was finished would the New Covenant be sealed.⁶⁵ One quickly recognizes that the role of the church was drastically altered with these views.

Russell basically said that the problem was semantic and passed it off as not thinking straight. From what has been cited from 1885, he placed the New Covenant in the millennial age and the Abrahamic Covenant in the Gospel age. Still the New Covenant

⁶⁵ Watch Tower Reprints 5 (January 15, 1909): 4320 and (February 15, 1909): 4340.

was sealed and in force.

It is one thing to have an unclear idea come into focus. It is another thing for an idea to be in focus, go out of focus, and come back into focus. If we are discussing doctrine, either the covenant was believed to be sealed or not sealed; it was either thought to be in effect during the Gospel age or it was not. It cannot be understood one way, then the other, and then back again without contradiction, which is far more than a semantic problem. This is no doubt why White concluded that Russell's teaching became confused and befuddled.

Russell did not retreat from reestablishing his early New Covenant doctrine despite protest from within the movement soon after the 1907 articles were published. Three prominent associates of Russell were included in the protest; when they failed to persuade Russell to change, they eventually left the movement.⁶⁶ Russell's comments demonstrate that he minimized the significance of the contradiction. The end result was that Russell caused the very

⁶⁶White, A People for His Name, p. 111.

sectarianism he despised.

In line with this, even when there had been an anticipation of possible time-proof problems, there was no theological revision when the chronology did collapse after 1914.⁶⁷ Russell died in 1916 believing that World War One was the Armageddon of the scriptures.

CONCLUSION

I have shown the development in Charles T. Russell's views regarding the church from the early 1890s to the early 1900s. In almost forty years of work, Russell held to common restorationist themes regarding the church. His antisectarianism, call for liberty, and ideal of Christian unity relate him to religious leaders who preceded him. At the same time, his theological divergence from traditional Christian doctrine and modernism made him distinct.

The development I have discussed demonstrates that Russell's thought on the church was confronted by institutional historical realities: increased numbers/congregations, internal dissent, and outward

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 89.

opposition. Over time, there were gradual changes in his thought often influenced by these realities. There were some specific contradictions that were not adequately explained. These issues have been raised and placed into perspective. Out of this, I hope, I have contributed to attempts to give Charles T. Russell his proper place in American religious culture.

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